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SUBJECT: VIEWING RUSSIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS THROUGH A POLITICAL
LENS

REFS: A. Moscow 1834
[1](#)B. Moscow 1811
[1](#)C. Moscow 1434
[1](#)D. 06 Moscow 12348

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ACCORDINGLY.

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Although Russia's demographic crisis has not been a major issue during the Duma elections campaign, most of the political parties have focused some attention on reversing the population decline by encouraging higher birth rates. Led by President Putin, United Russia has crowed over recent improvements in both fertility and mortality statistics, introduced a National Demographics Concept, supported new GOR restrictions on abortions, and backed a family values project in ten pilot regions. Just Russia leader Sergey Mironov has proposed greater financial incentives for families that have two or more children, including government-backed home mortgages, while Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov has urged every family to have three children. The candidates have focused on popular anti-abortion and pro-birth measures and largely avoided tougher questions like what to do about Russia's high mortality from alcohol and tobacco use. END SUMMARY.

Putin Leads Way, Adopts National Demographics Concept

[1](#)2. (U) During a November 21 nationally televised rally in support of United Russia, President Putin took credit for recent improvements in both mortality and fertility statistics: "Thanks to the active social policy, mortality is going down. For the first time in recent years -- I pin great hopes on the audience here -- the birth rate is growing." Putin's brief comment echoed previous statements from leading GOR officials and United Russia campaigners that the recent demographic improvements resulted from the National Priority Health Project (Ref B) and new financial incentives to encourage more births (Ref A).

[1](#)3. (U) On October 9, Putin also signed an 11-page National Demographics Concept, which lays out three basic stages of demographic planning through 2025. During the first stage (2007-2010), the GOR plans to limit natural population loss by reducing deaths from road accidents, cardiovascular disease and other preventable causes, improve maternal and child health care and social and family conditions to encourage more births, and increase immigration. From 2011-2015, the GOR will attempt to stabilize the

Russian population at the level of 142-143 million, by improving the health of the population and encouraging healthy lifestyles; creating favorable conditions for women to both work and bear children; and increasing financial incentives for families to have multiple children. In the final stage (2016-2025), the government will take "preemptive measures" to prevent a worsening of the country's demographic situation and achieve a population level of 145 million, even though there will be a significant decline in the number of women of reproductive age during this period. The GOR has admitted that the concept paper still needs a concrete action plan for achieving these ambitious goals. The GOR is supposed to present an action plan with specific measures in early 2008.

Russia Gets Tougher on Abortions

¶4. (U) At the beginning of November, the Ministry of Health and Social Development reduced the number of social and medical reasons that will justify a state-funded abortion. The MOHSD also published new rules requiring a woman to consult with a social worker and sign an informed consent form before having an abortion in a government-funded clinic. The ministry is also reportedly considering, but has not yet implemented, a ban on abortions in private clinics. (NOTE: In 2006, for the first time in the last 50 years, there were more births than abortions reported in Russia. The trend of fewer reported abortions than births is expected to continue in 2007, though the officially registered abortions do not include the 15-20 percent of abortions that take place in private clinics. END NOTE.)

¶5. (SBU) Some observers, such as consultant Kirill Danishevskiy from the Open Health Institute, believe that the imposition of greater restrictions on abortions was an "obvious attempt" by the Government and United Russia to do something about Russia's low fertility rates during the Duma election campaign. These efforts would bolster earlier GOR attempts to stimulate more births, such as the 250,000

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ruble payment to families who have a second child and basic improvements to maternal and child health care under the National Priority Health Project (Refs A, B). The new restrictions also may have been a concession to Russian "pro-life" religious groups. Most observers do not believe the new rules will have much of an impact on the actual number of abortions in Russia, given that dozens of medical reasons still remain in place permitting abortions in government-funded clinics, and abortions are still freely available in private clinics.

¶6. (U) Some fringe parties have proposed even greater restrictions on abortions, all of which the Duma has rejected. Sergey Baburin, leader of the People's Union Party and a vice speaker in the Duma that ended November 16, proposed a draft law banning all abortions except for certain medical reasons, and fines of 80,000 rubles for health providers who violated the ban. Rodina party members introduced legislation in the Duma a year ago requiring a husband's consent for a woman to have an abortion.

Promoting Family Values

¶7. (U) In addition to supporting Putin's National Demographics Concept and GOR measures to restrict abortions, United Russia also supports the "Strong Family" project, which was launched in August 2006 and is being implemented in ten regions. The project aims to reduce teenage crime, prevent abandonment of children, support young volunteers working with families and at-risk youth, and encourage the public to embrace strong family values. The party gives awards to the most successful participants in the program, which includes about 35,000 families who are raising 55,000 children and teenagers.

Russians Should Bring Forth and Multiply

¶18. (U) Many politicians have argued that Russians should simply have more children and not rely on immigration to solve the problem of a shrinking population. Just Russia leader and Federation Council Speaker Mironov has adopted a strong pro-birth, anti-immigration policy. He has proposed that the GOR fund half of home mortgages for families that have a second child and fund the entire mortgage if a third child is born. Although Mironov is generally opposed to immigration, he does support efforts to stimulate a greater influx of Russian speaking migrants from CIS countries. He would provide Russian citizenship to those who pass Russian language, culture and history tests. In contrast to demographic forecasts that the Russian population will continue shrinking and be somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 million by 2050, Mironov has bullishly predicted that Russia will have a population of 250 million people by 2050.

¶19. (U) Communist Party Leader Gennadiy Zyuganov, in a recent address to students, stated that every Russian family should have three children. Beyond this platitude, the Communists have said little recently about the demographic crisis. Historically, they have blamed Yeltsin for sowing the seeds of a "population genocide," arguing that declines in fertility and increases in mortality began during his presidency. (NOTE: Experts generally agree that the population loss resulted from long-term trends in declining fertility and increasing mortality that began during the Soviet era. However, they note that political instability, economic uncertainty and stress did play a role in worsening mortality and fertility statistics during the Yeltsin years. END NOTE.)

¶10. (SBU) The Yabloko Party has argued that the demographic situation should be improved through greater support for families, mothers and children, and by reducing morbidity and mortality from environmental factors. The party has not presented any specific plans for achieving these goals. On November 20, the Urals State Economic University in Yekaterinburg "without explanation" revoked an invitation for Yabloko Party leader Grigoriy Yavlinskiy to deliver a speech at a demographics conference at the university.

¶11. (U) LDPR Leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (known for making provocative comments) has mentioned the legalization of polygamy, which in his view would lead to more Russian births, especially given that there are fewer Russian men than women. Zhirinovskiy also recently suggested that Russia accept males from overpopulated countries who are willing to marry single Russian women and raise families with them.

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What About Preventable Mortality?

¶12. (U) Politicians have paid little attention to dealing with high mortality rates, particularly among men, where the average life expectancy is 60.37 years of age. The general consensus among experts is that this would lead more quickly to demographic improvements than trying to stimulate births. President Mikhail Davydov of the Academy of Medical Sciences has argued that the GOR made a fundamental error by focusing so much attention over the past 18 months on promoting greater births through financial incentives (Ref A). In his view, the GOR should have made a concentrated effort to reduce the number of deaths from preventable causes, such as road and workplace accidents, alcohol poisonings, suicides and murders. Likewise, Kirill Danishevskiy, a consultant at Russia's Open Health Institute, has argued that the government could greatly reduce mortality and increase life expectancies among the working-age population by adopting programs aimed at reducing the prevalence of hard alcohol drinking and smoking, which most experts agree are the main factors driving Russia's high mortality (Refs A, C, D).

¶13. (U) Despite these criticisms, some components of the National Priority Health Project are aimed at reducing preventable mortality, such as modernizing and expanding Russia's ambulance fleet and building high-tech medical centers (Ref B). The National Demographics Concept signed by Putin does not address either smoking

or hard alcohol consumption. Many analysts believe such measures would be politically unworkable, given the lingering history of Gorbachev's unpopular attempts to restrict alcohol consumption (Ref A, C), as well as strong tobacco and hospitality lobbies opposed to greater restrictions on smoking (Ref A).

¶14. (U) Despite the political difficulties in regulating alcohol and tobacco, the Just Russia party platform includes a complete ban on alcohol and tobacco advertising, restrictions on the number of retail locations where alcohol can be sold, and a state monopoly for the production and sale of ethyl alcohol (the main ingredient in vodka). The party also would establish a state-funded network of health care facilities for the mandatory treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction and social services for alcoholics and drug addicts.

¶15. (U) The Just Russia party's platform also calls for the GOR to spend 5 percent of GDP on health expenses (the GOR now spends 3.66 percent of GDP on health, according to the WHO). The party also wants the GOR to set maximum retail prices for drugs, provide free medical care for all children, and introduce mandatory testing for drug use in high schools and universities.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) Despite the magnitude of the problem, demographic issues have not featured prominently in the run-up to the December 2 Duma elections. Politicians have focused on popular anti-abortion and pro-birth measures and largely avoided tougher questions like what to do about Russia's high mortality, with only Just Russia taking a stab at measures against heavy alcohol and tobacco use.

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